

Make It Rain on Dem Unpaid Interns

In an economy bleaker than a go-go bar in Jamaica Plains, unpaid internships are gold. The competition to be able to copy paperwork and update FileMaker spreadsheets at the Whitney (the Whitney!) is cutthroat. Indeed, my brother—a student with professor recommendations galore and an astronomically high GPA at his well-known liberal arts college—was unable to secure a volunteer gig with our hometown public library. The reason? Too many applicants. That’s correct. He just wasn’t ‘Solana Beach public library material’.

Damn. And while of course the notion is hilarious, it comes as no great surprise. Volunteer positions and unpaid internships, especially for young people pursuing interests in the humanities, are the only jobs available. Even before the financial collapse, the resumes of graduating college seniors were filled with impressive internships and apprenticeships, and the unflattering barista job was kept secret.

I have always had an icky feeling about unpaid internships in the arts. Something about them just feels a little seedy and manipulative on the part of the organization. Of course, I’m a hypocrite; I have held unpaid internships with a variety of employers—everyone from independent curators to large non-profit foundations. But my diverse experience has perhaps only made me more wary of them. Really, I just think they’re illegal.

Unpaid internships are violations of wage and hour laws. What were once paid jobs are now unpaid internships and apprenticeships, exchanging labor for experience and possible networking opportunities. I understand how that benefits an employer but if states have wage and hour laws in place which require all except exempt employees be paid a minimum wage then I don’t understand how an employer can get away with paying that same person no hourly wage. In other words, if you can’t get away with paying someone \$2.00/hour how is it legal to pay them no dollars an hour?

On April 2, 2010, the *New York Times* confirmed my suspicions. In an article titled “The Unpaid Intern, Legal or Not”, Steven Greenhouse reports that authorities in states like Oregon and California have begun to investigate employers who use unpaid interns. They are fining companies citing, of course, the obviously unfair employment practices. The only issue is that these companies are for-profit, whereas most museums and arts organizations are non-profits. As such, the crackdown has left the art world mostly unscathed. Of course, I recognize that in the arts industry, most employers couldn’t even afford to pay an employee \$2.00/hour. Particularly at independent galleries and small organizations, unpaid interns are an invaluable resource, performing some of the blander administrative tasks so the directors can focus on larger goals. But if an arts organization can muster up its staff to apply for huge grants to hire a public relations representative or graphic designer, as I have seen occur in organizations with unpaid interns, it can apply those efforts to securing similar grants to compensate their interns. Or, at the very least, it can work with universities to create subsidies for interns in school.

The art world, both for-profit and not, does not like to talk about salaries and money, though those are of course the very things that drive the industry. Especially in the DIY sphere with independent curators, small galleries, and start-up nonprofits, there is a romanticized notion of a ‘labor of love’. That’s all well and good, but at what point does it turn into unfair labor practices? When an intern spends ten to twenty hours per week, excluding travel, endlessly updating contact lists in sales force for a resume line? When an intern spends months and months in a dark file room without any new contacts or a job offer to show for it? Or when an intern is sexually harassed and unable to file a complaint because she is not an employee, as referenced in the *New York Times* article?

So not all organizations offer the internship from hell (though I have heard far too many horror stories to feel very kind about the practice as a whole). Some of them offer genuinely rewarding experiences, lasting careers, and meaningful relationships. But rewarding or not, all internships need to offer some kind of compensation, legal protection, and regulation.

These positions open in the arts have gradually morphed over the years from paid jobs into unpaid internships. A decade or two ago, internships were relatively rare and only lasted for brief amounts of time. Now, every arts organization in Philadelphia offers an internship—from the Philadelphia Museum of Art to the Slought Foundation to Space 1026. It is rather jarring that 28-year-old screen-printing skateboarders have interns. Not just interns, but interns that were selected from a pool of applicants. This has just got to stop.

For a scene as familiar with Marxist theory as it is with the day of the week, the quiet acceptance of an exploitation of labor is somewhat surprising. The art world, much like media, radio, and television, has always relied on the labor of smart graduates for little or no pay. But the system is one that favors privilege; in a burst-bubble art market like this one, there are increasingly few candidates able to afford a pay-free job. There may be a surplus of eager volunteers at local libraries, but surely organizations are missing a much large (and more well-qualified) applicant pool by not offering concrete incentives. Sure, dinner cruise photographer doesn’t have the same ring to it as MOMA intern, but a job’s a job.

-Manya Scheps

Organization	Job
College Art Association New York, NY, United States <small>new</small>	Intern: Membership, Marketing, and Development Internship unpaid Read Complete Description Approved on 05/12/2010
APA New York New York, NY, USA <small>new</small>	Summer Interns for a Photography Non-Profit Organization Internship unpaid Read Complete Description Approved on 05/11/2010
White Columns New York, NY, United States <small>new</small>	Summer Internships - TWO Internship unpaid Read Complete Description Approved on 05/11/2010
Studio Miriam Cabessa Brooklyn, NY, US <small>new</small>	Studio Manager Assistant Internship unpaid
Riley Illustration New Paltz, NY, US <small>new</small>	Digital image manager Internship unpaid Read Complete Description Approved on 05/10/2010
Bloomsbury Auctions New York, NY, USA <small>new</small>	Internship Internship unpaid Read Complete Description Approved on 05/10/2010
New York Foundation for the Arts (NYFA) Brooklyn, NY, USA <small>new</small>	Marketing & Research Program Intern Internship unpaid Read Complete Description Approved on 05/07/2010
Johnson Trading Gallery New York, NY, USA <small>new</small>	Intern Internship unpaid Read Complete Description Approved on 05/07/2010
Gavin Brown's enterprise New York, NY, USA <small>new</small>	Internships Internship unpaid Read Complete Description Approved on 05/06/2010
D'Amelio Terras New York, NY, United States <small>new</small>	Internship Internship unpaid Read Complete Description Approved on 05/06/2010
Marvelli Gallery New York, NY, United States	Summer Intern Internship unpaid Read Complete Description Approved on 05/04/2010
Collector Systems New York, NY, USA	Registrarial / Marketing Intern Internship unpaid Read Complete Description Approved on 05/03/2010
Laurel Gitlen (Small A Projects) New York, NY, United States	Internship Internship unpaid Read Complete Description Approved on 05/03/2010
Ester Partegas Studio Inc Brooklyn, NY, USA	Internship Internship unpaid Read Complete Description Approved on 05/03/2010
Confidential New York, NY, United States	Gallery Intern Internship unpaid